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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE'S ELECTION -- WHAT'S A SUCCESS?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Eric T. Schultz under Section 1.4
b/d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The March 31 parliamentary election cannot deliver a change of government, which under Zimbabwe's constitution is appointed by President Mugabe. That said, the stakes are high for both parties. ZANU-PF's objective is an election that secures it a 2/3 majority of 100 seats, including the 30 President Mugabe appoints, which would enable it to amend the constitution. It is also hoping that the elections will open the door for broader international re-engagement, the main reason the ruling party has moderated its behavior and rhetoric compared to past elections.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED: For the MDC, measures of success are more complicated, with various outcomes offering different post-election possibilities. However, the two key numbers are 51 seats, which would allow it to retain its current block on unilateral constitutional change, and 76, which would give it an outright majority in Parliament and could precipitate real political change. The MDC will also be looking to the West to continue to pressure the Mugabe regime, arguing that regardless of the election outcome, it would have done better on a level playing field. END SUMMARY.

ZANU-PF Success: 2/3 Majority and Greater Acceptance at Home and Abroad

¶3. (C) The 2005 election has been a prominent ZANU-PF priority for several years now. Initially, the party's imperative was to crush the MDC and reduce its representation as much as possible and by all means possible. However, the nation's continued economic deterioration and the party's own factionalism, combined with regional and international pressure, have led it to adjust its election objectives. The party's main goal is now to secure a two-thirds majority in Parliament and to do so in a way that improves the party's image domestically, regionally, and internationally.

¶4. (C) A two-thirds majority would allow the ruling party to amend the constitution at will, without negotiating with the MDC. This would give ZANU-PF near total control over Zimbabwean politics and allow it to secure its hold on Zimbabwe post-Mugabe. ZANU-PF starts with a 30-seat advantage, the seats appointed by President Mugabe under the current constitution. The party therefore needs to win only 70 of the 120 contested seats, something which many in ZANU-PF believe it will do easily given its control of state machinery and media and its ability to influence voters through handouts and propaganda.

¶5. (C) A two-thirds ZANU-PF majority could allow the MDC to maintain a voice, something the ruling party appears to have decided is an acceptable price to pay for the resumed international re-engagement it sees as crucial to national recovery. In that regard, ZANU-PF appears to have taken a deliberate, calculated gamble that it can win without the widespread violence of the 2000 parliamentary and especially the 2002 presidential elections and that the absence of violence will force the international community to recognize the election's legitimacy. However, the lack of violence has given the opposition grounds for optimism and has made the elections far more unpredictable than anyone would have predicted even a month ago.

MDC Success Hinges on Optics, Retaining Leverage

¶6. (C) With its domestic and international image dented by the failure of its final push in 2003, followed by several by-election defeats, the MDC months ago had "conditionally suspended participation" in the election, and many were concerned that it was slipping toward political oblivion. With the opening of campaign space, greater access to media, and a buoying re-entry into the race, MDC leaders now hold conflicting views of their party's prospects. While some fear the opposition may lose half its 52 seats (the MDC won

57 in 2000 but has lost some in subsequent by-elections), most say it has a meaningful chance to take half the contested seats, with an outside chance at an overall majority absent intimidation and vote-rigging. The leadership has been careful not to publicly offer explicit targets as potential indicators of success, in part over fear that rising expectations could set the bar too high and make apparent failure more likely.

17. (C) As with the ruling party, the MDC's parliamentary delegation strength) and the leverage that representation affords) will be a central indicator of success. However, for the MDC there is not one single number that signals success but a variety of numbers that signal measures of success:

-- The MDC wins fewer than 51 seats. ZANU-PF would have its two-thirds majority and the MDC's future could be at risk since it will have little political leverage. The extent to which it is able to convince domestic, regional and international audiences that the results were fraudulent could mitigate the scale and scope of the ruling party's victory. Still, the MDC might remain one of Africa's most robust oppositions, with enough intellectual firepower and popular support to exert meaningful influence on policy-making. Significantly, with close to 50 seats, it would likely remain viable in the run-up to the 2008 presidential and local government elections.

-- The MDC wins at least 51 but fewer than 57 seats. Some in the opposition would see taking fewer seats than in 2000 as a disappointment. However, the party would retain its blocking minority for constitutional amendments, giving it leverage against the ruling party and creating an impetus for negotiations. Moreover, the MDC would have fought back from near oblivion on an unequal playing field and would gain valuable momentum for 2008, and will have established its staying power as a factor in Zimbabwean politics.

-- The MDC wins at least 57 (the number it won in 2000) but fewer than 61 seats. This result would stem the momentum the ruling party generated over the past two years with its by-elections successes. The MDC would retain blocking leverage and a significant voice in Parliament. However, the country's imbalance of power would be largely unaffected as the ruling party, with its extra 30 appointed seats, would still control the legislative and executive branches.

-- The MDC wins at least 61 but fewer than 76 seats. Taking a majority of contested seats but less than an absolute majority in the Parliament would represent a moral victory for the opposition, and would bolster its claim to have won the mantle of democratic legitimacy from ZANU-PF. However, this outcome is unlikely and would still not change the imbalance of power.

-- The MDC wins 76 or more seats. With an absolute MDC majority in the Parliament, the government would be unable to pass any legislation without MDC assent and it could force legislative gridlock with unpredictable consequences. This outcome is highly unlikely.

18. (C) For the MDC, another key measure of success will be the perceived stature of the party's leadership as it emerges from the campaign. MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai is not running for a seat but is coordinating the party's campaign in pivotal Masvingo province and is cutting a high campaign profile nationally. The personality and judgment he projects will reflect strongly on the party's image, with considerable implications for the party's influence at home and abroad and for its chances in the pivotal 2008 presidential election. A strong MDC showing, in the face of unequal odds and coming after years of systematic repression by the GOZ, would almost certainly enhance Tsvangirai's stature as a credible political leader within Africa.

Election Conduct and International Role

19. (C) International reaction to the conduct of the election will key for both parties. Although there have already been improvements in the election environment (refs A and B), key variables, such as the level of violence/coercion and the integrity of election administration, have yet to play out. Moreover, the playing field remains skewed in the incumbent ruling party's favor and the historical legacies of past flawed elections) residual fear and apathy) cannot be remedied in the short term by any amount of adjustments to the election rules.

110. (C) Observers no doubt will reach different conclusions on the election's freeness and fairness, driven by their different weighting of factors and different political agendas. In this regard, the ruling party will be content with a regional stamp of approval, both to sell the election

result to its domestic audiences and as a potential bridge to wider international engagement. Assuming it gets regional endorsement for a ZANU-PF victory, the ruling party can be expected to step up its "charm offensive" and further warm its public and private rhetoric toward the West in the election's wake.

11. (C) For its part, the MDC, regardless of how it fares, will attempt to leverage its influence with Western countries to counter a regional stamp of approval. Accordingly, no matter how many seats it wins, it will argue that election irregularities prevented it from winning more and will press for continued international pressure on the regime, both for leverage in any post-election negotiations and in the run-up to the presidential election of 2008.

Success for Zimbabwe?

12. The MDC and ZANU-PF each measure election success as a zero-sum game, and to some extent it is. In the broader analysis, however, the election's success must be measured with regard to trends in the election environment, and the extent to which this election reflects the will of the Zimbabwean people. In the same vein) and perhaps most importantly from our perspective) the election must be judged by its impact on Zimbabwe's dysfunctional political dynamic. Because it will not yield a change in government, this election is not a pivotal event by itself but just the latest development in a complex drama that will not likely reach its climax until the presidential election of 2008 or beyond. The outcome will set the stage for the next phase of this struggle and is thus of no small importance. However, we should avoid over-emphasizing this event and thereby play into Mugabe's argument that this vote will & resolve8 Zimbabwe's crisis of political legitimacy.

SCHULTZ